St. Gregory Palamas and the Moscow School of Christian Neo-Platonism (A.F. Losev, S.S. Averincev, V.V. Bibihin, S.S. Horujy)

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> "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."
> —John 3:8

1. Introduction.

The development of Russian thought in the 20th century was a dramatic process. Brilliant flourishing of philosophy can be seen in the beginning of century, but in 1922, after the October Revolution, many well-known thinkers were banished from Soviet Russia. Later, in the times of the Great Terror of the 1930s, when exile and execution became usual tools of authorities, many Russian thinkers and priests were killed. The result of this policy was the prohibition of free philosophizing within Soviet state. It is symptomatic that young men, who read the works of classics of Marxism-Leninism and tried to understand the true nature of socialism, were persecuted in the 1970s. In spite of all restrictions which had been widespread in Soviet state, traditions of thought were developing, because, as in all cases of state imposed restrictions, spiritual life and philosophical studies cannot be prohibited. For example, the studies of talented Soviet Marxists, whose ideas were not always supported by authorities, reflected the inclination of the Russian intelligentsia to social justice and its desire for improvement of social life. Many scholars were forced to go into related philosophical areas– aesthetics, logic or philosophy of science. It is widespread knowledge that in the 1970s really successful and fruitful schools in the areas of logical investigation, methodology and philosophy of science were organized in the Soviet Union. Surprisingly, the unique

school for Byzantine Studies was also created. In addition, fundamental researches in the history of European Platonism were carried out by Professor Aleksey F. Losev, the leader of the "Moscow School for Christian Neo-Platonism" (Horujy, 2003, pp.191-207).

2. Aleksey F. Losev, *Imiaslavie* and the Fate of Philosophy in the Soviet Russia

The origins of the Moscow School of Christian Neo-Platonism date back to the pre-revolutionary tradition – to the philosophy of Pan-unity and *Imiaslavie*, and to the teachings of Fr. Pavel Florensky and Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. It is known that Pavel Florensky was killed in the Special Purpose Camp that was established exactly for the clergy in the Solovki monastery on the shore of the White Sea. Bulgakov was exiled in 1922. Thus, Aleksey Fedorovich Losev (1893-1988) became the main representative of this school of thought in Soviet Russia. Among his followers in the 1970s were Vladimir V. Bibihin (1938-2004), a translator and an original thinker, who played the role of Professor Losev's Secretary for many years, Sergey S. Averincev (1937-2004), a famous Russian scholar, who studied Ancient Greek and Byzantine culture and literature, and Sergey S. Horujy, an author of numerous works dedicated to the mystical tradition of Hesychasm. Losev originated from the Don Cossacks, he was educated at Moscow University before the Revolution and could translate from Ancient Greek and other European languages. The young Aleksey Losev was personally acquainted with many prominent Russian thinkers. It is important to note that his research and teaching supported the continuity of Russian thought and culture during the Soviet times with the pre-revolutionary philosophical tradition.

The theological conception of *imiaslavie* emerged in the Caucasus and then it was accepted by Russian monks at Mount Athos. However, this idea was officially rejected by the Russian Church. The Russian monks who stood for *imiaslavie* were returned from Athos to Russia in 1913 and scattered among numerous monasteries and parishes. It should be recognized that the *imiaslavie* movement revived interest of the Russian educated society to Christianity in general and to the monastic practice of Hesychasm particularly. The reason for this was the remarkable similarity between the historical period of the flourishing of Palamism in late Byzantine Empire and the period before the Bolshevik Revolution. As St. Gregory Palamas' doctrine of the Tabor Light and Divine Energy became a remarkable event in the mystical traditions of St. Athos in the period of the twilight of Byzantine Empire, on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution the

Russian *imiaslavie* provided a powerful impetus to Russian intelligentsia for God-seeking and became a strong incentive to counter mystically the oncoming atheistic Soviet regime.

In the 1920s, Losev was one of the leaders of *imiaslavie* movement in the Soviet Russia. Among the supporters of these ideas were not only priests, theologians and religious philosophers, but also scientists, mathematicians, and even an actor. In 1922, at the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, Fr. Pavel Florensky performed the mystery of marriage between Losev and Valentine Sokolova. The bride was an astronomer born in Moscow and originated from a merchant family. This young woman became an active participant of the *imiaslavie* movement. The confessor of the Losev family was Hieromonk David, adept of *imiaslavie*, former abbot of the Russian St. Andrew Monastery on Mount Athos. On the 3rd of June, 1929, the young spouses took vows under his guidance and were named Andronicus and Athanasia. Fr. Irenaeus, former monk of Panteleimon Monastery at Athos and one of the principal figures of *imiaslavie*, was also close to the circle of Losev.

Despite of all difficulties of life in the conditions of the Civil War and dictatorship of the Bolsheviks, Losev wrote and published eight books in the 1920s. It is interesting that these works were published using his own money. Among these works were "The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science", "Music as a Matter of Logic", "The Dialectics of the Artistic Form", "The Dialectics of Number in Plotinus", "Criticism of Platonism by Aristotle", "The Philosophy of the Name", "Essays on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology", "The Dialectics of Myth". The three last works were dedicated to the philosophy of *imiaslavie*. In addition, he wrote numerous articles and prepared papers on *imiaslavie*. It is especially important that his books have been recognized by the Russian émigrés: the famous Russian philosophers V. Zenkovsky, N. Lossky and S. Frank noted the originality of his ideas and philosophical interpretations. However, the official Soviet ideologues started a real persecution against him; the so-called "Red Professors" criticized him severely and charged him with serious accusations. As a result, his philosophical activity was interrupted by his arrest in 1930. He was sentenced to 10 years in the special labor camps. His friends and companions in the *imiaslavie* movement were also sent to the camps and exile, and many of them were later executed. Losev was sent to the White Sea – Baltic Sea Canal construction, but in 1932 he was released. The sad result of his staying in the camp was considerable loss of vision. After returning from the camp, he was not able to get a permanent job. He lectured at various Higher Education Institutions in Moscow and the surrounding provinces. Finally, in 1944, he became a

professor of the Moscow Pedagogical Institute, where he worked at the Department of Classical Philology, then Russian literature, and finally till the rest of his days at the Department of General Linguistics. Since the 1960s, he had been working at his famous eight-volume "History of Ancient Aesthetics" dedicated to the study of Platonism. In addition, in his other researches, he demonstrated the importance of Platonism for Renaissance aesthetics and in the philosophy of Pan-unity of Vladimir Solovyov.

During the 1920s, his authored works focused upon ideas commonly associated with *imiaslavie* and centered on the problems of Name and Myth. He sought to demonstrate the ontological status of the Name and its fundamental importance in the understanding of being by interpreting the texts of Plato, Plotinus, and the Corpus Areopagiticum. Losev discussed these issues in his letters to Fr. Pavel Florensky. He stressed the social role of the Name: if there is no Name, there is no social communication. Besides, the Word determines our consciousness and motivates our will; we can also express the depth of our feelings through the Word. "And we pray and curse by the use of names … and there are no limits for the life of a name, there are no measures for its power. Name and words created and hold the world,"- says the Russian philosopher (Losev, 1997, p.181).

In the end of 1920s, Losev worked at the limit of his abilities, knowing that his activity may be interrupted at any moment. In this period, he reveals the meaning and value of Palamite disputes in his "Essays on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology" (1930).

3. Aleksey F. Losev on Palamite disputes

"Essays on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology" is a lengthy book consisting of more than 900 pages. It ends with a chapter dedicated to the discussion of theological issues, including the criticism of Barlaam's point of view and the praise of the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. The Russian philosopher stresses several important points concerning the fundamental differences between the Byzantine theologians. The first of all is Platonism. According to Losev, Barlaam, who studied the works of Aristotle in the West (and in Latin translations that were made under the influence of Neo-Platonism), inherited the principles of Western tradition and sought to combine Christianity with Platonic philosophy. For Losev, such strategy is absolutely unacceptable because: "Platonism in its theory of intelligent ascent does not concern matters of intimate confession, repentance, and of a struggle, i.e., the struggle with sinful thoughts." (Losev, 1993, p.871). The abstract mode of thought prevailed into the

philosophical practice of ancient thinkers; there was no fire of the passions and inherent contradictions in one's personality. “Hesychasm recognizes the possibility of ascent”, - Losev says, - “only under these conditions (confession and repentance till to the innermost intimacy and depth etc.), for Plato and Plotinus this is not required” (Losev, 1993, p. 871). The philosophical doctrine of Platonism, according to Losev, asserts "a gaze which sees only the body in being, and actually does not feel the fullness of internal life and living participation in the life and fate of personality" (Losev, 1993, p. 870). The Platonic abstract concept of body doesn’t allow us to understand the integrity of human personality. Losev proposes a paradoxical formula: "Platonism is a-physiological, because it is corporeal; mystical Orthodoxy is cordial, because it is personal” (Losev, 1993, p. 871). In this sense, only one idea is absent in the philosophy of Plato – the idea of Salvation.

The second point of disagreement between followers of Barlaam and Palamas is that Barlaam visited Renaissance Italy and incorporated the ideas of Western thinkers into his theory. He rejected the practice of mental prayer because he did not believe in any real possibility of communication with God. The Russian philosopher reminds that in Barlaam’s understanding “the God as an independent being and essence remained *per se* as an absolute unknown, and Energies, because of their intelligibility had to be completely separated from God, and had to be considered as created” (Losev, 1993, p. 872). On the one hand it was agnosticism in relation to God; on the other, it was a real dualism in the way that we are to understand Divine Energy. In Losev’s opinion, this kind of interpretation was an ill-fated perspective arising out of the development of Western metaphysics. In this regard, the Russian scholar notes that "under the amplification of modern Rationalism, the Dualism of Barlaamism is turned into a Cartesianism and Occasionalism; under the amplification of Subjectivity is turned into a Kantianism; under the condition of weakening of the sense of Transcendence is turned into a Positivism, and so on" (Losev, 1993, p. 873). From this point of view, the confrontation between Palamism and Barlaamism can be seen as developing in opposite directions relative to the development of European culture. In Losev's words: "In Palamism, i.e., in strict Byzantinism, the God is an absolutely unfathomable abyss, who symbolically manifested Himself in certain energy and a name; in Barlaamism, i.e., in the Renaissance philosophy of the West, the God is essentially an abstract concept: in fact there is no God; there are only godless creatures" (Losev, 1993, p. 874).

It should be stressed that Losev discusses other dogmatic and

ecclesiastical issues and religious differences among two directions in Christianity. In his interpretation, Catholicism, based on Aristotelian philosophy, combined idealism and corporeality, and thus, is subordinated to the creation that is characteristically reflected in the sculptures of Christ within the Medieval Gothic churches. Within the Orthodox tradition the transformation of the world came by music, eloquence and fine arts, and its attributes are the ringing of church bells and the prayerful contemplation with the use of icons. Furthermore, Losev could not accept the peculiar *erotomania* of the Medieval Catholic nuns' mystical visions. He believed that these revelations were initiated by sinful temptations; in this regard, he paid attention to the "sacred silence" of the Orthodox mysticism of Hesychasm.

In general, the Russian philosopher emphasised the difference between the ontologism of the East and the psychologism of the West that was shaped and determined by the writings of St. Augustine. If (according to Losev) in the Western ascetic Revelation there is a search for the path to truth with different inner feelings and personal attitudes, for the Orthodox monk it is always a concrete fact and a with certainty adoption of truth. Thus, it is very important that in the conditions of persecution by the Soviet state Losev turned to Palamism, to the Orthodox concept of Divine Energy, while his starting point was the syncretism of Russian religious philosophy and Solovyev's conception of Pan-unity; and he had done this before the publication of the pro-Palamism famous works of Russian theologians in emigration. "Ascetic and Theological Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas" of Hieromonk Vasiliy (Krivoshein) was published in 1936 and "The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church" by Vladimir Lossky appeared in 1944. Losev finished his studies of Palamite disputes very simply: he published the Acts of Constantinople Council (1351) against Barlaam and Akindynos in his own Russian translation.

4. Vladimir V. Bibihin and Sergey S. Horujy on Hesychasm and Palamism

Numerous pupils and followers of Aleksey F. Losev also studied the mystical practices of Hesychasm and Palamism. Unfortunately, their works could not be published under Soviet rule. For example, in 1978, Bibihin made a translation of St. Gregory Palamas' *Triads for the Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Quietude* for publication in the 19th issue of *Theological works* which had been prepared by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1960, but the text was destroyed at the last moment before printing. The reason for its destruction was the numerous references to works of Fr. John

Meyendorff. As a result, a new version of the translation of Augustine's *Confessions* was published instead of the *Triads*. A translation of the *Triads* with afterword and commentaries of Vladimir V. Bibihin appeared only in 1995 (*St. Gregory Palamas*, 1995). A situation with Sergey S. Averincev, who planned to publish an article on St. Gregory Palamas in the 27th issue of *Theological works*, was quite similar: the article was declined. In his turn, Sergey S. Horujy wrote the book *The Diptych of Silence. Ascetical anthropology in theological and philosophical presentation* in 1978; however it was published only in 1991 (Horujy, 1991).

Russian scholars believed that the doctrine of Palamas cannot be explained from the point of view of any philosophical tradition, including Christian Neo-Platonism (Averincev, 1997, p. 323; Bibihin, 2010, p. 97; Horujy, 1991, p.22, p.42). At the same time they emphasize the high level of his philosophical education recalling the speech at the Imperial palace that fully confirmed the level of Palamas' knowledge in the traditional Byzantine sciences and arts, and above all, in the philosophy and particularly the logic of Aristotle. The high level of St. Gregory Palamas' education is manifested in his theological treatises and demonstrated by subtle dogmatic-theological definitions. It just so happened that Russian scholars studied Palamas' teaching in the context of specific philosophical projects. For example, Vladimir V. Bibihin devoted several hours in his course of lectures on "Energy", delivered at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Moscow State University in 1990-1991, to Palamas' thought. Later, he repeated this course of lectures in the St. Filaret Moscow Orthodox Christian High School in 2002.

In his philosophical interpretations, Bibihin works from an understanding that the issue of energy has become one of the most significant for modern civilization, since, on the one hand, everyone talks about the problem of energy resources, the total lack of energy reserves, and the upcoming general crisis, while, on the other hand, the power of the human being and energy of nature are spent on various pointless projects. Modern man is squandering his own power and natural energy on the endless pursuit of the new opportunities. In this regard, the Russian scholar recalls about the energy of quietude as unique practice of Hesychasm and Palamism (Bibihin, 2010, p.137). However this does not mean that dispassion or some kind of heart atrophy is a priority here. Bibihin quotes the words of Gregory of Sinai that "immobility is not enough for Christ to live in a human being" (Bibihin, 2010, p.117). According to Vladimir Bibihin, sinful passion causes dispassion, dementia and weakness of human soul, while the energy of quietude leads to the fullness of mind. This practice

means “the end of propulsion, internal strife, confusion, end of tortures, anxiety and incompleteness; and more than that, it is a general cessation of all separate actions, when ears hear one but eyes see another and the mind is thinking about the third; it is the collection of all senses and abilities in such a simplicity, which includes the movements of all kind and remains calm” (Bibihin, 2010, p.143).

According to the Russian philosopher, such understanding of energy is conceptually proximate to its Aristotelian interpretation. In this regard, Bibihin notes that “in Aristotle the first sign of energy, which is the continuation of Parmenides’ idea of Being, is perfection, completeness. Energy is similar to motion, but the energy per se is completeness and the achievement of a goal (*On the Soul,* III, 7, 431a6)” (Bibihin, 2010, p.365). However, the Russian scholar emphasizes that the teaching of Palamas is not a philosophical deduction from the dogma, because this is impossible: “the dogma is not subject to mental activity” (Bibihin, 2010, p.115). The issue is important for Palamas, because it is related directly to the possibility of living communion with God. Palamism is “the experience of parting with an efficient, effective, ardent God, and the impulse to stop the departure of such a God is the real essence of Palamite dogmatics” (Bibihin, 2010, p.134). In addition, it is a search for “agreement between the personal grace and life of the world” that can be realized in the idea of deification. In this sense, as Bibihin considers, Energy for Palamas "is the Divine presence". Later on, the Russian scholar adds that the main problem of Palamism is the separation of essence and energies; it is "a problem, significant, if you like it, fruitful and much explaining problem in Palamite thought" (Bibihin, 2010, p.138).

The well-known modern Russian philosopher, theologian, translator, and physicist, Sergey S. Horujy offers another interpretation of Hesychasm and Palamism in his numerous monographs and articles. He has a doctorate in Physics and Mathematics, but he currently is the Professor of the Institute of Philosophy in Moscow (the Russian Academy of Sciences) and Director of the Institute for Synergetic Anthropology, which was founded by him in 2005. Horujy formulates the task of his studies clearly: “a new contemporary reading of the entire corpus of Orthodox asceticism is necessary”. In this connection, he stresses that new interpretation should be not simply a retelling of this doctrine but a “reconstruction of practice, presentation of Orthodox feat as a holistic approach of the man to himself, as a way of life and strategy of activity: to see man in his transcendental aspiration, in his living action” (Horujy, 1998, p.25). This experience of Christian anthropology is principally important in the situation of postmodern culture, with its use of strategies of transgression when the

lack of unity and integrity of human nature leads to the desire to overcome all sorts of boundaries and limits (social, sexual, etc.), that result in death (case of M. Foucault).

Experience in Hesychasm moves in an absolutely opposite direction: it is an experience of energy; it means to put a man together in his integrity. In this context, Horujy argues that the anthropological position of Orthodox mysticism and ascetic practice has been expressed in the writings of St. Gregory Palamas. For Horojy, the main part of Palamas' heritage is a polemical essay *Triads for the Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Quietude*. The Russian philosopher emphasizes that "the *Triads* contain essentially a whole and very clear exposition of Orthodox theology on almost all major doctrinal sections" (Horujy, 1991, p.20). The Russian scholar considers St. Maximus the Confessor, who laid the basic principles for the Orthodox monastic life and deification, to be a founder of the Hesychastic practice. In his turn, Gregory Palamas essentially developed these principles from St. Maximus. Some prominent Russian theologians of the twentieth century - Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), Archbishop Basil (Krivoshein), Archpriest Gregory Florovsky, Vladimir N. Lossky, Archpriest John Meyendorff - presented in a modern interpretation this practice. In Horujy's opinion, these Russian thinkers have formulated the conception of a so-called "Orthodox energetism". In fact, for Orthodox theology it represented a real turn towards the ideas of Neo-Palamism. Thus, the Christian Orthodox East has chosen the path of "infinite Patristics".

It is fundamentally important that, in the frames of this movement, Orthodox theology is deployed in the perspective of a theology of energies. For Horujy, Western theological tradition is based on the discourse of essence and makes *essentia* the highest point of knowledge, which normatively regulates all actions and events. In this discourse, metaphysics instantiates, whilst action is a derivative; that is why in scholasticism dogmatic theology precedes practice. The scholastic system of thought with its piety towards Aristotle's authority led to the autonomy of reason and to the seclusion of philosophy; however, there were still religious dogmas in philosophy and these served as limits to the use of reason in philosophical research. The next stage of the development of Western thought was the process of secularization of philosophy. Hesychasm offers principally a radically new form of ontology and epistemology (if we can apply these philosophical conceptions here); however, this does not mean that Hesychasm is close to Platonism regarding its dichotomy of body and soul. If Barlaam, a supporter of Platonism, insisted on this sort of dualism, then Hesychasm and Palamism

proclaimed an “anthropology of wholeness” and defended the idea of the wholeness of human being. In this sense, the doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas as the organic continuation of the Orthodox patristic heritage remains true to Hesychasm and to the mystical experience of communion with God.

The Russian scholar many times emphasizes in his monographs and articles that the Christian anthropology of St. Gregory Palamas is particularly relevant in the perspective of modern theological and philosophical discussions. Horujy argues that the experience of Christian mysticism and asceticism is subjective, but, at the same time, it is completely objective. In this regard, the body is not denied but is included in the process of mystical practice. Feelings, emotions, sense of heat or smell are fully real. Human senses and passions *per se* are not unnatural, hence a practicing ascetic moves from unnatural passions to natural and then to the supernatural. For Hesychasm and Palamism man is a flexible and changeable being, he is open to infinity. The hesychastic conception of man as an infinite being overcomes the theme of death as the finitude of human existence; this conception of death as finitude is particularly popular in modern humanitarian studies especially in the discipline known as Thanatology. Through the practice of mental prayer man can reach the horizon of synergy that combines freedom and grace. In this sense, one of the main motives of all Palamite theological thought, which is closely associated with the experience of the Orthodox monastic asceticism and Hesychasm, is the recognition and defense of a unique opportunity in man’s synergetic union with God: his deification or *theosis*. In this way, Palamas develops the central theme of Byzantine theology and the whole experience of Eastern Christianity.

According to Sergey Horujy, the famous formula of "deification" was expressed by St. Athanasius of Alexandria: “God became a man so that a man might become God”. Macarius of Egypt and Maximus the Confessor contributed to the development of this idea. The Russian scholar emphasizes that, in his teaching, Maximus the Confessor "unites dogma and asceticism, practical evidence and theoretical argumentation, so deification takes the form of a coherent theological conception that is firmly rooted in the “database” of our Fathers" (Horujy, 1998, p.150). In addition, Horujy stresses the impact of Symeon the New Theologian’s mystical practice on the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. In his opinion, Palamite synthesis is the essence of the Orthodox way of thinking: “The conception of the Divine Energy allows us to link together all elements of the doctrine, which have already been existent for a thousand of years: its dogmatic basis of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the mysticism of

light in Athos' Hesychasm and its eschatological outputs" - writes the Russian thinker (Horujy, 1998, p.151). Thus, the mystical and theological experience of Palamas is the apex of the Orthodox conception of *theosis*, that is, deification of the world and man, which certainly has relevance to the whole modern Christian theology.

5. Conclusion

As a result, we ought to admit that, in spite of various persecutions, Aleksey Fedorovich Losev ensured the continuity in the development of the original Russian religious philosophy. The merit of Sergey Horujy and other scholars representing the circle of Losev is that they continued to study the traditions of Hesychasm and Palamism and thus, demonstrated the importance of this mystical practice in the contemporary postmodern debates on human nature. They inherited the ideas of Losev and the exiled Russian theologians, who have supported the turn of Russian religious thought to the Patristic heritage of Neo-Palamism.

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St. Gregory Palamas in Russian Thought: Spiritual Practice versus Rationality

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1. The actuality of spiritual experience

In the moving reality of Post-Modern culture, which fills the latest sociological literature, and which is characterized by wide popularity of clip-art and internet surfing, there has appeared a kind of thinking, which is oriented on the endless shift of pictures and images. One key characteristic in this new thinking is that it does not consider as important a sense of personal self-identity; so there is a legitimate question about the internal principles of what constitutes a person in the Post-Modern era. On the one hand, it seems that our world offers a variety of strategies of choice and possibilities for the realization of individual preferences, yet on the other hand, a traditional form of self-awareness of the European individual, that is rooted in the Christian experience of feelings of sin and repentance, has been eliminated. The history of "I" (Ego), explicated in the West-European philosophy in Augustine's *Confessions*, who for the first time recognizes *libido* (sinfulness) as a kind of underground basis of Ego, through the Cartesian subjectivity (Cogito) to the psychoanalytic theory of personality, is transformed into the world of domination of things, where there is postulated a rigid system of social standardization. In pursuit of a higher level of consumption and in the desire to be successful and to live according to standards of prosperity established in the society of Post-Modernity, the human is constantly in a state of psychological stress and destruction concerning his own identity; moving in this way, he is subjected to the process of depersonalization. Strangely, medieval mystics remarked on facing similar issues thus: the intention to own the external things and the benefits of the outside world would never be adequate for the infinite nature of man, whereas the practice of monastic asceticism and mystical knowledge of God lit the path of attainment of positive spiritual